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FILM LANGUAGE: A STUDENT-MADE DICTIONARY.

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The failure of verbal descriptions to convey an understanding of film terminology led to a student production of a 20-minute color film that defines various film methods by illustrating them. A technique is shown on the screen and simultaneous soundtrack narration explains how this technique can be used. When the narration lasts longer than the illustration, random patterns continue the visual stimulation until the narrator finishes his remarks. A 3-minute experimental segment accompanied by a jazz soundtrack concludes the film. This segment encourages the students to utilize the cinematic terms and techniques, and also attempts to make them realize that they have not completely mastered the forms of film media. (LH)

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COVER Seeing with new eyes. From a poster by the School of Visual Arts, 209 E. 23rd St., N.Y., N.Y.

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Film Language: A Student-Made Dictionary

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by G. Howard Poteet

FILM IS LANGUAGE.

That phrase should have, by this time, the self-evident and axiomatic quality of "a rose is a rose is a rose." The problem is its articulation—its syntax and grammar. Verbal descriptions beg the questions by putting understanding in another medium: print. The most fitting approach would define film language by using more of the same.

We made an illustrative 8mm film which attempted to do just that—a twenty-minute-long color film that was in effect a film dictionary. It defined various film techniques and suggested their aesthetic possibilities.

close-up—The subject takes up almost the entire screen (used to reveal important details).

medium shot—A three-quarter view of the subject (used to show relationships of characters to each other and environment).

long shot—Takes in the whole scene (used to establish setting).

pan shot—The camera moves from one side to another or up and down (used to follow action or to indicate surroundings).

zoom shot—An optical effect that makes the camera appear to move to or away from the subject (used to direct attention or to show relationship).

dissolve—One scene is merged into another scene (used to indicate a passage of time).

fades—*fade-in:* Gradual appearance of a scene from darkness.

fade-out: Gradual disappearance of a scene into darkness (both are used to indicate a passage of time).

montage—Combination or overlapping of a series of shots (in combination gives an impression or establishes a mood).

In addition, the effect of lighting on characterization was presented: low key lighting for horror, high key for beauty. An illustration of the effect that sound can have on the meaning of a film was also given. Finally, the effects of editing and cutting were explained by a synchronized tape recording.

Because of limited funds, it was not possible to shoot all of the film especially for the explanatory movie. Instead, out-takes, or film clips that had been discarded from home movies, were pieced together. This proved acceptable because the continuity of scenes was not a major concern. The film began with a single frame and then illustrated how several frames projected in rapid sequence give the illusion of motion. Next were shown the various shots and angles that may be used to develop certain moods or feelings. Part of a commercial black-and-white film was spliced into the all-color film in order to show how professional film makers use lap dissolves and montages (technically unavailable to most amateur film makers) in order to obtain certain effects.

In this movie, the film clips which indicated particular film effects were usually shorter than the narration that accompanied them. The clip explaining a zoom-shot lasted five seconds on the screen; the description of how it could be used aesthetically lasted forty-five seconds. It would have been foolish to repeat the shot over and over again during this time. It was necessary, however, to extend the visual part of the film in some manner. This was done by soaking scrap film in household bleach until the film was clear. Then red, blue, and green magic markers were used to draw random strips and

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dots directly on the film as Norman McLaren of the Film Board of Canada has done. When projected, this appeared as a series of moving, jiggling spots of color on the screen which carried the movement of the film as the narrator continued his comments. Students appeared to accept it as an abstraction that allowed them to concentrate on the audio component of the film.

The film concluded with a three-minute-long experimental segment accompanied by a jazz sound track. This film, done in the manner of Shirley Clarke or Stan Van Der Beek, was an attempt to make students realize that they were, perhaps, illiterate in some forms of the new media. This student-made language film, entitled *Seeing America*, consisted of a series of shots of speeding, upside-down automobiles, tourist traps, and violently gyrating roadside signs. It was, of course, an attempted satire on home-made travel movies as seen through the eyes of a young child. The students reacted enthusiastically. Their response was without doubt immeasurably informed by the work they had done on their film dictionary—a few but important steps to film literacy.